



From Good to Great: A Curriculum Design Journey

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At Macandrew Bay School the revised New Zealand Curriculum has become a vehicle for growing leadership capability and strengthening the staff culture of learning together. Principal Bernadette Newlands says that school-wide professional development around literacy and numeracy has had plenty of positive spin-offs for the way staff work together as a team. She describes how this has happened in this project report.

At Macandrew Bay School we have worked hard over the past few years on building a strong school culture around the goal of moving “from good to great”.

Our school-wide professional development around literacy and numeracy has had plenty of positive spin-offs for the way we work together as a team. It has helped us to develop the kind of trust where we have the confidence to open up our teaching practice to each other for observation and feedback. As colleagues we want to learn from each other because we have a genuine respect for each other’s capabilities. Our professional development experiences have led to stronger school and syndicate teams that are focused on taking shared responsibility for the children’s learning and their development as people.

We understand what our evidence is showing us and use it to guide our teaching and evaluate our practice so we can get better at what we do. All of this prior teamwork has meant that we had a solid professional learning culture in place as we prepared to implement the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC).

Learning together

One of the core school values that teachers hold dear is showing our passion for learning. As a staff we wanted to bring that passion to our exploration of the curriculum.

Kiwi Leadership for Principals (2008) describes the quality of ako – the principal’s role as a learner. I believe that principals need in-depth professional knowledge to build their own credibility as effective leaders of their schools. As principals we need to keep our own passion for learning alive and model this attitude to those we work with.

We refer to our staff as a professional learning community. In our school that means learning together as a team, and being focused on continuous improvement.

The work of Peter Senge (1990) inspired me to think about a learning community

in more aspirational terms. In *The Fifth Discipline* (1990) he states that a learning organisation is where:

- People continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire.
- New and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured.
- Collective aspiration is set free.
- People are continually learning how to learn together.

I could see that exploring the curriculum and designing and shaping our own school curriculum could take us beyond our current good practice both collectively and individually.

What an opportunity! What a challenge!



The process

Our work around the NZC is probably very similar to what has happened in many New Zealand schools as we all prepare for implementation.

Stage 1: Exploring

In 2007 and 2008 we were delving into the document – getting our heads around what was special about the curriculum, how it was structured and what opportunities it might offer to our students and to us as teachers. We also started the important work of consulting our staff, families and board of trustees to clarify our school vision, values and strategic goals.

By the beginning of 2009 we were ready and keen for our first curriculum teacher-only day. We used the day to explore in detail what the school's vision actually meant and to think about the values in the NZC, our own school values and the key competencies.

Stage 2: Trialling

Inspired by Linda Woon's articles in *New Zealand Principal* in 2008 (August and November), we decided to trial her KISS model for curriculum design (keeping it straightforward and simple) and linked our big ideas for the school-wide theme each term to an appropriate value, key competency and future focus. This approach allowed us to spread our exploration of competencies and values across the whole year. It also allowed us time to co-construct learning intentions and explicit criteria around the key competencies with the students, and together as teachers in staff meetings.

Students now regularly use these criteria to reflect against in their learning logs.

As teachers we used the key competencies as part of our appraisal process in 2009. Each of us reflected on our successes and challenges when managing self, relating to others, thinking, contributing, participating and using language symbols and texts. If we ask the children to reflect on themselves and their performance, then we should be able to do the same thing!

My deputy principal and assistant principal were responsible for appraising the teachers in their syndicate area this year. This

helped me in terms of sharing workload and gave the D.P. and A.P. a chance to further develop their leadership skills. I also got a chance to work on my coaching skills in supporting them to take on this role.

Stage 3: Professional input

Throughout the year we have taken up all opportunities for professional development that have come our way. Early in February 2009 our ICTPD cluster organised the first of two sessions with Lester Flockton. Half of the school staff went to these sessions, including the full management team. Lester has such a lot of wisdom to share regarding the curriculum.

The key messages we picked up were:

- Develop your own curriculum literacy and carry this knowledge in your head.
- Don't rush. Take your time to really think about what matters at your school and for your students and what quality teaching and learning is all about.
- Know what the requirements of the NZC are. Don't embellish or misinterpret them.

Our lead ICT Teacher returned from the 2009 Learning@School conference with lots of valuable new learning. She shared [Trevor Bond's model](#) of how the national curriculum sits parallel with a school's own local curriculum. We used this model to help us move forward.

During our second teacher-only day we turned a large wall of the staffroom into a graphic depiction of this model. We have added to this as we develop aspects of our own curriculum and find it helpful to have the NZC as part of our daily visual landscape while we improve our curriculum literacy and learn to hold this knowledge in our heads.

Our local NZC principals' cluster has been a valuable sharing network. New Zealand Curriculum On-line tools and resources also opened our eyes to the ways other schools across the country were approaching implementation.

The local School Support team has provided a range of one-day courses which were attended by teachers with particular curriculum responsibilities. These have been followed up with visits from facilitators.

Stage 4: Sharing the responsibility for leading curriculum design

Staff members have shown leadership in stepping up to share the workload of designing our school curriculum. They are leading staff meetings around each learning area and we are teasing out what we truly want our students to learn from each. This is our chance to establish what our collective aspiration is for our students.

The numeracy lead teachers have drafted a curriculum statement on Mathematics and Statistics. They worked with the rest of the staff to gain the input and ideas of everyone and from there developed a very comprehensive statement. It is always problematic going first though, as our thinking has since changed a bit! We have now decided to have a broad umbrella introduction to our curriculum that addresses things that are common to all the essential learning areas, therefore simplifying what we need to cover in each essential learning area's curriculum statement. This is still a work in progress and we may refine our thinking again as we get further down the track. We are starting to realise that our school-designed curriculum will not be set in stone, but will be a living document that is added to and subtracted from as we clarify our thinking.

Establishing and refining our school values has also been a work in progress. We sent home strategic planning questionnaires in 2008 and established a list of four key values.

In 2009 we decided to check that this list was exactly what our community wanted. Each child in the school had a homework task which was to work out with their parents what their core family values were and then to see how these aligned with the school values. Our original four values became six as we realised how important honesty and kindness were to our families and that this needed to be reflected in our school curriculum.

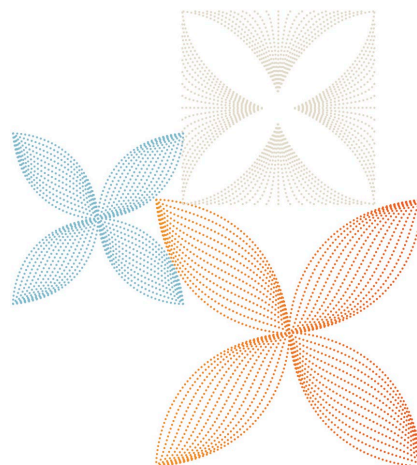
Reflecting on our learning

Our journey towards designing a curriculum that fits our school community has engendered a good deal of learning for us. Here are some of the things we've learned over the last couple of years.

- Designing a deep, rich school curriculum that truly reflects our students and community takes time as well as much thought and talk.
- We had to ensure that the NZC remained in the foreground of our thinking, but still had to attend to the ongoing projects of a busy school.
- Progress isn't linear or straightforward. It's OK to change your mind in an effort to keep moving closer to what you really want.
- Our knowledge of the NZC has definitely deepened and continues to do so.
- Staff have stepped up to take on a leadership role, growing their own skills and confidence in the process.
- We are getting a greater sense of what we want as a school for our students.
- Teacher talk and student talk about our school values and the key competencies is now part of our daily vocabulary and school culture. Weekly focus assemblies have helped to embed this.
- We will continue to work on drafting our locally-designed curriculum.
- We plan to hold a community meeting early in 2010 to introduce the NZC and our school curriculum and get further input from families.
- We will enjoy seeing class curriculums unfold that reflect the needs and interests of our students in them.

As a principal on this metaphorical journey I have personally learned the following things:

- Get in the car, turn the engine on and don't let it stall.
- Get the whole family to jump onboard.
- Make sure everyone has got a driver's licence so you don't need to always be in the driving seat.
- Try to resist being one of those bossy back seat drivers – aim instead to be a calm unflappable driving coach sitting alongside the driver.
- Aim for a high hill and believe your motor's got the power to get up there. Don't worry if you get down to first gear on the steepest bits.
- Don't drive too fast. Look at the view on the way. Try and enjoy the ride.
- Navigate a path through the obstacles.
- Nourish your car with good oil and high quality petrol.
- Don't worry too much if you sometimes feel like you are going round in circles. As long as you know where you want to go you'll get there in the end.
- Celebrate the journey as well as the destination.



REFERENCE

Senge, P. (1990). *The Fifth Discipline*. Doubleday.